

PEOPLE
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From Cub Scout to Pentagon

Duxbury native
speaks on sacri-
fice of veterans

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Understanding the sacri-
fices of the veterans is the les-
son learned and shared by
U.S. Marine Corps Brigadier
General Ronald Johnson at
this year's Memorial Day
Service at First Parish
Church.

A Duxbury native,
Johnson is director of opera-
tions for the U.S. Marine
Corps stationed at the
Pentagon.

Before Johnson addressed
the audience, Barry Dunlap, a



Gen. Johnson

past command-
er of American
Legion Post
223, provided a
brief history of
the origins of
Memorial Day.

Though many
versions of this
story exist, the
most official is an order made
in 1868 by John Logan, com-
mander-in-chief of the Grand
Army of the Republic.

Logan commanded all his
troops to acknowledge May
30 as a day to recognize fallen
soldiers. "No form or ceremo-
ny is prescribed, but posts and
comrades will in their own
way, arrange such fitting serv-
ices and testimonials of
respect," Logan stated in his
order.

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'Understand their Sacrifice'

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Dunlap read another, less official, version of the Memorial Day origin story, where soldiers witnessed a woman and two children tending to a soldier's grave — removing weeds and laying fresh flowers. The soldiers were so moved by this act, they established a Decoration Day, now known as Memorial Day, for fallen comrades. Over time veterans have paid respect to their fellow soldiers, Dunlap read, "partly as a catharsis and partly so that those who come after will not forget."

The Duxbury High School Concert Choir then sang "America the Beautiful" followed by a reading of the Gettysburg Address, by high school senior John Bostrom. Johnson then took to the podium, welcomed by a standing ovation.

Johnson, a DHS graduate, served in Desert Storm, Desert Shield and Operation Iraqi Freedom and holds several military honors including a Bronze Star and the Legion of Merit.

After three tours in Iraq, Johnson said, he felt "safe" being back home in Duxbury. He recalled marching as a Cub Scout in the town parade and said he never imagined one day returning as a guest speaker for the day's services. Now, Johnson has a true understanding "of what veterans went through."

Since the Vietnam War, Johnson said Americans had possibly "grown complacent" in their acknowledgment of the sacrifice of veterans, but now there is a reemergence of appreciation.

He acknowledged that people sitting in the audience had possibly lost loved ones in the Iraq War. "I know how it feels to lose friends on the battlefield ... not being able to sleep at night." Johnson lost 54 men in his three Iraq tours.

Johnson named three of those soldiers, who were all killed by explosives. "I'm sorry that I let you down," were the last words of Nick Nolte, "a rock, hard, strong Marine," described Johnson.



An audience mixed with veterans and laypersons pledged to the flag at the Memorial Day Service at First Parish Church. Duxbury native and Brigadier General Ronald Johnson spoke at the service.

Nolte left behind a wife and a three-year old daughter. Another fallen soldier was Lance Corporal Redford, Johnson's youngest marine, barely 19 years old, who died a week before he was due home.

"These stories go on and on," said Johnson. Although it's sad to talk about the sacrifices they've made, Johnson said it is an "awakening" of awareness of the sacrifices made by veterans of past

wars.

When Marines mourn, Johnson explained, "we don't talk about how our friends died, we talk about how they lived." As Johnson stepped away from the podium, he was given another standing ovation.

The audience remained on its feet to salute the flag and sing The Star Spangled Banner. Reverend Catherine Cullen then closed the service with a prayer.